

Denman Thompson House,  
Girard, Penn'a

1880-1881

Penn'a  
Pa. 58

HABS  
PA.

25 GIRA.V,

1-

PHOTOGRAPHS,  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
ERIE COUNTY, PENN'A  
*Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings*

Historic American Building Survey  
Karl S. Morrison, District Officer,  
Erie, Penn'a

HABS  
Pa.  
Girard, Pa.

DENMAN THOMPSON HOUSE  
Girard, Erie County, Pennsylvania

Owner.

C. W. Foster. R.F.D. #2, Girard, Erie County, Pennsylvania.

Date of Erection

Approximately 1832.

Architect

Unknown.

Builder

Unknown.

Present Condition

Dilapidated.

Number of Stories

One and one-half story, single residence.

Materials of Construction:

Hand-hewed posts, rafters and beams, hand-made and split lath,  
smooth plaster walls, hard finish, fresco made on premises.  
All mouldings, etc., hand-made.

Other Existing Records:

Encyclopaedias, personal interviews and personal recollections.

Additional Data-Bibliography:

Encyclopaedias: Americana, International and Nelson's.

## DENMAN THOMPSON HOUSE

In a small cottage situated within less than a mile of the famous Devil's Backbone in Girard township, Erie County, Pennsylvania, in the year 1833, a baby boy was born who was destined to make the theatre goers of the country laugh and weep with him in the impersonation of American rural life and conditions. His father had settled on a farm and the house had been painstakingly constructed from the trees that grew in the vicinity. The mouldings of even the doors and windows had been wrought by hand, and into this home Denman Thompson came as a welcome visitor to his parents. His father planted a tree which is still standing on the west front side of the house when Denman was born.

Denman Thompson was probably best known for <sup>his</sup> impersonation of the rustic "Josh" Whitcomb, and for his play "The Old Homestead." When he was growing up, he removed to Swanzey, New Hampshire, and remained there until 1852 when he made his stage debut at Lowell, Massachusetts. He had some success in the "French Spy" produced from 1854 to 1868 with the Royal Lyceum Stock Company of Toronto, Canada. Joshua Whitcomb was brought out in 1875, and proved perhaps to Denman himself that this was a part that would be his exclusively, for in 1886 he produced the "Old Homestead" which was along similar lines, but showing increased ability both in the story and in the acting from former productions. This play ran for four successive seasons in New York City, 1888 to 1892 and toured the rest of the country for years. When this was produced in New York City a yoke of oxen and a load of hay were driven across the stage.

His aunt, Mrs. Angelina Babitt, a sister of his father, was a great favorite of his, and he played many tricks on her, but she was always too shrewd for him. One of his tricks consisted in making up a member of his company in 1893 when he visited her, and sending the man to her door to impersonate himself, but the laugh was on Denman for the aunt remarked, "No, you are not Denman."

Denman Thompson died in 1911. He was the son of Capt. Rufus Thompson, a carpenter from New Hampshire. When Denman went to New England to work for a relative in the counting room as a sort of bookkeeper he must have had a longing for the stage, for in 1852 he entered this career. In 1854 he was at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Toronto as a comedian, where he remained fifteen years. He was twice permitted to play elsewhere, one season in the City of London, England Theatre and in 1874 he made a professional visit to the West Indies. While an invalid in 1875 at the Red Lion Hotel in Pittsburgh, he wrote "Joshua Whitcomb" which attracted the attention of John B. Stetson, manager, who put it on the stage of the Howard Athenaeum in Boston with Thompson in the title role. He wrote "Old Homestead" played first in the Boston Theatre 1886 and in New York 1888-89-90-91.

DENMAN THOMPSON HOUSE

Lyman Luther Foster bought the farm and home in 1864, moved into it in 1865. He removed the front part and built a new front of two stories, somewhat larger, and moved the front of the Thompson house about thirty feet to the west and about fifty feet to the rear. The original kitchen has been remodeled to some extent, but the rear door has been preserved and still has the original thumb latch and other hardware, and the upper part has a panel with nine lights of glass. The lath used in the Thompson house and kitchen are sawed lath, cut in a sheet and then split with an ax or hatchet as they are nailed on. The front door of the Thompson house proper is placed in the center of the wall with windows on each side spaced about 3' from the doorway. There is one window in the second floor directly over the door on the first floor. On the east side there is one door and one window. The windows on the lower floor have 15 lights of glass, those on the upper floor have 12 lights of glass. All mouldings are hand-made, all scantling hand-hewed, lath sawed, then split with an ax as they are nailed on. The rooms are plastered with cow-hair plaster made on the premises, and covered with a frescoed finish. All woodwork hand-made. A narrow stairway, boxed, and winding, gives access to the small attic rooms. The front door has three lower vertical panels, upper part six vertical panels with horizontal paneling between. The side door has three lower vertical panels and three vertical upper panels and horizontal paneling between. There is one chimney, and the roof is covered with wooden shingles.

The present owner of the property, Charles Wallace Foster, is a descendant of the Wallace clan of Scotland. He was born January 29, 1860. His grandfather was Lyman Luther Foster. Mr. Foster claims relationship with Stephen Collins Foster, the song writer.

*Annie Scott Baxter*

Approved

*Karl Erickson Dist. Off.*  
*July 28, 1936.*

Reviewed July 31, 36, THW